

REALITY TV SHOW: A MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

For a number of years now, Reality TV has become the in-thing in Malaysian television. Since the introduction of *Akademi Fantasia* and *Malaysian Idol* were aired in 2001 the attention of everyone has been tuned in to reality television, and as expected, there is a proliferation of reality shows on Malaysian television scene. These two programs were such a huge commercial success both for the ASTRO and Media Prima brands along with their sponsors, thus opening the floodgate for what is now becoming a revolution. Moreover, sighting a unique business opportunity in the concept of reality TV, many organizations and TV producers are coming up with their own ideas which, in most cases, are only slightly different from what we know and have seen already, as they all draw from the same pool of original idea. But, why has the concept of reality TV gained such popularity?. It is the objective of this paper to study the emergence of local reality TV programs and its contributions in promoting positive and family values for Malaysian viewers.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of television on its viewers has been documented by decades of research. Some of this impact is negative, but social marketers have long recognized that when television contains positive messages it can also have a positive effect. In other word, it can be used to educate as well as entertain, inspire as well as provide escape. Television has long served as a source of information for viewers on various topics. In recent years, a new form of television entertainment has exploded onto the scene, that is "*reality TV*". Reality TV is now generally defined as a television program that feature members of the public in unusual situations, often competing for a prize, and often involving audience participation. When the year 2000 came, many people thought that significant changes were going to occur. One change that very few people anticipated was the explosion of popularity of reality TV programs. Ever since the television program *Survivor*'s huge success in 2000 in North America, the reality television genre became intensely popular. Subsequently, many new reality programs have been launched everywhere. According to Yoon and Garma (2006), the dramatic rise in the popularity of reality television programs at the present time can be considered as phenomenal in the world media landscape. Many reality programs have created history in terms of people's participation and revenue generation.

Therefore, it is the aim of this paper to describe the nature of reality TV shows, provide an overview of these entertainment scenarios particularly in Malaysia and analyze some possible implications of these shows to Malaysian viewers.

ORIGINS OF REALITY TELEVISION

Precedents for television that portrayed people in unscripted situations began in the 1940s. Reality television is a genre of television programming which presents supposedly unscripted dramatic or humorous situations, documents actual events, and features ordinary people instead of professional actors. Although the genre has existed in some form or another since the early years of television, the current explosion of popularity dates from around 2000. Documentaries, and nonfictional programming such as the news and sports shows are usually not classified as reality programs.

THE PROLIFERATION OF REALITY TV

According to a study conducted by the Department of Education Tasmania, there is ongoing debate about the proliferation of reality television programming across the world, including the extent to which it is:

- A passing fad in light entertainment or a distinctive new television genre with a particular set of structures and features
- A reflection of changing society or simply the creation of disposable celebrities for mass entertainment purposes
- Accessible, interactive and democratic programming or an exploitative, voyeuristic, 'dumbing down' of television
- A corruption of the television documentary tradition or the broader transformation of television as a medium
- A reflection of a healthy society or one that is morally bankrupt and dysfunctional
- A new idea or an old idea using a new media form
- Respectful of privacy issues or promoting understanding of public issues
- Part of a culturally universal global trend or something distinctively Australian
- Concerned with important social or individual issues or documenting trivia
- Politically correct or sexist/ageist
- Passive mindless viewing or interactive critical viewing

TYPES OF REALITY TV

Reality television covers a wide range of television programming formats, from game or quiz shows, which resemble the frantic, often demeaning shows produced in Japan in the 1980s and 1990s. There are a number of sub-categories of reality television. Among others are the Documentary style; the Animal Planet's *Crocodile Hunter* may be the epitome of this type of show, the Elimination/Game Show; probably one the purest example of reality game shows in Malaysia was *Who wants to be a millionaire*, the Dating-based competition; in Malaysia, the local series of *Mencari Menantu* was aired on channel 9, *Mencari Cinta* was aired on 8TV and *Cornetto, Loves Perhaps* was aired on NTV7. The other types of reality tv is Job Search; in this category, the competition revolves around a skill that contestants were pre-screened for. Competitors perform a variety of tasks based around that skill, and are judged, and then kept or removed, by a single expert or a panel of experts. The show is invariably presented as a job search of some kind, in which the prize for the winner includes a contract to perform that kind of work. To name a few of the examples of local series include *Malaysian Most Beautiful* (for modelling), *Malaysian Top Host* (for tv hosting), *Malaysian Idol*, *Mentor*, and *Akademi Fantasia* (for singers), and *Audition* (for casting).

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM OF REALITY TV IN MALAYSIA

Media both in Malaysia and around the world seem to have “discovered” that so-called “reality” shows are very profitable, resulting in a growing string of such shows in recent years. Although not all are successful, many do achieve significant popularity and cultural prominence. That does not mean, however, that they are good for society or that they should be aired. Although reality television programs have created new dreams and opportunities for television networks, sponsoring agents, aspiring contestants and devoted viewers in Malaysia, the Malaysian Government and the majority of the viewers are not too pleased with some of these programs. The reality television program called *Mencari Cinta*, the latest in a flurry of Malaysian reality TV shows patterned on Western productions, might be considered tame in countries where this kind of entertainment often thrives on scandal and sensationalism. The *Mencari Cinta* reality show has evoked adverse comments from the public, including politicians, newspapers, the electronic media, singers and actors. Nevertheless, the reality show boom in this Muslim-majority nation is facing criticism by religious and government leaders who say the foreign-inspired fare threatens traditional values and steers viewers toward moral and cultural corruption. A prominent cleric with the Malaysian Council of Muftis, Datuk Harussani Zakaria was reported to have said that “these programs that promote extreme behavior should be banned” and expressed view that “we’re supposed to be modest Asian people, but we risk our heritage when we borrow from the West’s lifestyle.” (The Associated Press, 2005). The *New Straits Times* reported on 3 August 2005, that Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak complained about how the reality shows lacked Asian values. Even though these are local/Malaysian versions, they, according to him, “borrow extensively from Western culture which he feared could threaten Eastern values and lead to moral decadence.”

The evolution of reality TV is pretty interesting, but the key question for program developers is “What is the secret of its success?” Tony Cohen the CEO of FremantleMedia expressed that there are three basic yet vital elements, which are the format, the event and the audience. Firstly, the format. Most reality shows have a brilliant mix of two genres, which are all the standard elements of classic game show (competition, rules, expulsion, prize and winner, controlled environment) and all the standard elements of classic soap opera (auditions, casting directors, story lines, characters and high emotion). What makes the blend so special is the people on the shows. They are (more or less) “real” people, exhibiting real emotions and real behavior. This gives these programs an unpredictability that makes them riveting. Secondly, the best of these shows have become major events in their own right and have raised huge public reactions. In Malaysia, the controversial of reality tv program called *Mencari Cinta* has been debated by various levels of Malaysian communities mainly by Muslims. Thirdly, the audience. Reality shows generally attract a significantly younger audience and massively polarize old and young viewers. Importantly, despite this, a study conducted by Christenson and Ivancin (2006) discovered that while reality TV draws viewers from virtually all demographic groups, it is disproportionately popular among preteens, adolescents and young adults. Reality TV has evolved into a genre that many media experts believe presents ever meaner, more competitive, and more hurtful versions of “reality” to an ever-expanding audience. However, many viewers even now are enjoying reality TV. Psychologists offer several interesting reasons for the popularity of the shows: Viewers identify with the ordinary people who are chosen as participants and then become famous; viewers enjoy the competitive nature of the shows because there are always winners and losers. Participants, on the other hand, are attracted to the instant fame that highly rated reality TV shows offer.

Apart from that, in fact, what motivates people to watch reality tv programs?. According to Reiss (Reiss and Wiltz, 2004) “people who watched reality television had above-average trait motivation to feel self-important and, to a lesser extent, vindicated, friendly, free of morality, secure, and romantic. People prefer television shows that stimulate the feelings they intrinsically value the most, which depends on individuality”. On the other hand, Yoon and Garma (2006), reported that *suspense* was the most appealing motivational factor for watching reality television shows.

Why are networks giving such a push to reality programming? Television networks like reality TV because it makes them wealthy. Shows with high ratings earn millions of dollars in advertising for networks. Moreover,

because reality TV shows are unscripted, networks realize huge savings because they do not have to pay writers. Without writers for sitcoms and dramas, producers turned to reality TV shows. Hibberd (2002) asserts that costs are the main focus in reality TV shows. With this vastly less expensive option and the ratings for reality programming going through the roof, every network that wants to continue doing business feels the need to market new reality shows and somehow keep viewers begging for more; so far this plan is working. Throughout the wide variety of all of these reality shows a common thread remains: the people starring in the shows are supposedly all regular, “real” people going through “real” situations. One has to wonder what this bombardment of “realness” must do to the viewers.

Despite their lucrateness and popularity, many analysts find current reality TV shows ethically and morally reprehensible. Early reality TV series were good-humored and harmless, they believe, but shows like *Survivor* and its contemporaries are not. Participants can be harmed physically performing various stunts or humiliated and emotionally abused when they fail to win. Further, reality TV shows often glorify superficial characteristics such as physical beauty over spiritual strength and thus set a poor example for teenagers, with whom the shows are especially popular. Whether reality TV ultimately fades into television history or continues to evolve with the medium as a unique genre, for over fifty years it has offered interesting, often controversial entertainment.

On the other side of the coin, TV industry people and viewers point out that, at its best, reality TV also has some positive aspects (Christenson and Ivancin, 2006). It has the potential to provide inspiration for lifestyle changes such as the charity-based reality programme introduced by TV3 called *Bersamamu*. Dedicated to saving lives, easing suffering and restoring hope, *Bersamamu* is a programme which depicts the plight of some of the members of our society who have to endure challenges of having to survive and overcoming the various ordeals such as financial, poverty, illness, single motherhood, and abuse, to list a few. The objective of the programme is not only to highlight the problems that they are facing, but also to create interest and invite individuals as well as corporate bodies to contribute financially to the unfortunates portrayed in the programme. The CEO of MediaPrima, Dato' Farid Ridzuan was reported to have mentioned that “This *Bersamamu* is a programme which I hold close to my heart because I believe it will evolve into becoming something more than just a successful reality TV show. What sets it apart from the rest of the other shows is that this one will not only touch the hearts and souls of our viewers but it is one which will move an individual, an organization or the Malaysian public at large to make a difference in another fellow Malaysian's life. With its charitable sensibilities and ability to mobilize individual or communities in a single episode, we are getting a standard for a new genre: Good Samaritan television” (The Star, 2005).

CONCLUSION: BALANCING THE POSITIVE, THE NEGATIVE AND THE POSSIBLE

Basically, there is no empirical research on the impact of reality TV to the viewers' attitudes, emotions or values. Indeed, there is little research on reality TV's impact in any area. According to Christenson and Ivancin (2006), decades of research have shown that exposure to “mere entertainment” can produce, under the right circumstances and for better or worse, a variety of effects on viewers attitudes, knowledge and behavior.

As noted above, there is little research on the impact of reality television in general. However, given the extent to which viewers – especially adolescents – identify with reality television characters and situations, the messages communicated by reality television are important. Adolescents are trying to understand and fit into the world around them, and media plays a large role in that process. In that context, some reality TV programs spotlight a world rife with sexual situations, focused obsessively on physical attractiveness, and dominated by competition, scheming, humiliation, and voyeurism – clearly not the core values most adults would like to impart to the next generation. Others showcase the challenges of dealing with addictions, and may motivate healthy behavior change.

As more and more reality TV programs pop up, the competition becomes fierce to grab the most viewers. The programs are increasing in shock value and the prize amounts are rising too. The future of reality TV seems lucrative, it grabs the most ratings and we've been after this brand of entertainment since the beginning of time. It will be interesting to see where it's headed.

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